Orphaned Learners And School Dropout Rate In Primary Schools: The Case Of Shurugwi District, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT
The number of orphans roaming in streets in Shurugwi urban continues to escalate rapidly and has not yet received adequate attention. The study sought to explore the challenges that that force orphans out of primary education into streets. The study adopted a qualitative approach using a case study design. Interviews, document analysis and focus group discussions were used to collect data from participants. It was found out that orphans have serious financial constraints that weaken their ability to stay in schools. Besides, orphans do not get psycho-social support necessary for school achievement. The study recommends for the provision of educational requirements to orphans, development of a special curriculum relevant to the needs of orphans and creation of a supportive environment that addresses the needs of orphans.

Keywords: Orphan, learners, dropout, primary schools

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV and AIDS) has become the latest troublesome predicament to the entire nation and its products, the orphans especially the double orphans who look after themselves have suffered most (Chapeta and Ganga, 2013). According to FHAPCO, 2010 (cited in Tadesse, Dereje and Belay, 2014) the term orphan refers to a child who is less than 18 years and has lost one or both parents regardless of the cause of the loss. The loss of one parent classifies a child as a "single orphan" and the loss of both parents as "double orphan."

Nyamukapa, Foster and Gregson (2003) asserted that those who are getting infected and dying are in their most productive years of life and are leaving behind a train of orphans. The number of orphaned children has increased compared to the past due to the advent of HIV/AIDS. Mpofu,Chiremba and Kent (2003) affirmed that there has been an increase in the deaths of people especially those in the 25-40 years age group increasing the number of orphans. In the same vein, Kimani, Cheboswony, Kodero and Misigo (2009), concurred that HIV/AIDS pandemic has increasingly become a major factor in the emergence of orphans in the developing countries. The current statistics on HIV/AIDS show that many children are losing their parents at an alarming rate. According to Mpofu, et al (2003) it was estimated that by 2010 up to one third of all children less than 15 years would have lost one or both parents. As communities struggle to cope, many orphans are likely to be abandoned by their extended kinship and their community and end up in living on the streets.

There is substantial research on orphaned learners and school dropout (Oyede, Chikwature and Manyange, 2016, Shahidul and Zehadul, 2015; Kurebwa and Mabhanda, 2015; Mupa, Chinooneka and Namiti, 2013; Magwa 2007; Kafwa, 2007 and Nyamukapa et al, 2003). However, there is little research in Zimbabwe that paid attention on exploring the reasons why orphaned learners are failing to complete primary education. In Shurugwi district orphaned learners are dropping out of primary education at a higher rate than non-orphaned learners. This means the death of parents is found to have a strong detrimental effect on a child's chances of completing primary education (Nyamukapa et al, 2003). Given the central importance of education in the development of the child, it is not ideal therefore for orphaned learners to drop out of school for they would not acquire the necessary talents that make them highly functional in the society (Mupa and Chinooneka 2014). Following this logic, it is therefore imperative to dent a starting point to address the challenges that force orphans out of primary education in Shurugwi District.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Most orphans in Shurugwi District are dropping out of primary education prematurely, yet education plays an important role in the development of the child (Xiaoming, Yunfei, Xiaoming, Xiaoyi, Guoxiang, Xiuyun, Yan, Liying and Bonita, 2009). Given this fact this study sought to explore the challenges that force orphaned learners out of primary education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

i.   What are the challenges leading to school dropout faced by orphaned learners?
ii.   What strategies can be put to curb school dropout by orphaned learners?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Maslow's theory posits that human beings are born with certain needs which must be met in order for an individual to live their lives fully and eventually self-actualise. Needs according to Maslow (1954) can be arranged in a hierarchy of five levels ranging from physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, self esteem needs and self actualisation as highlighted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
Source: Maslow (1954)

Physiological needs

Physiological needs are the lowest on the hierarchy of needs. They are needs to satisfy physical needs such as hunger, thirst, warmth, shelter, and sex. These needs are primary and should be satisfied first before any other needs (Cunningham, 2008). According to Maslow (1954) unmet physiological are life threatening. Usually these primary needs are inadequate for orphaned learners. Lack of shelter may lead to problems of children staying in streets who are commonly referred to as 'street kids' while lack of food may lead to malnutrition and retarded growth

among such learners. This affects their concentration in class and resultantly their academic performance and may drop out of school.

Safety needs

Cunningham (2008) propounds that when physiological needs are met safety needs become pronounced. Safety needs refer to the need to feel safe in an environment, the need to feel that the world is organised and predictable (Maslow, 1954). Safety needs are generally concerned with the environment and can be seen at home, at school, and elsewhere. If a child has a bad home life as in this case, absent parents due to death, the child will have trouble focusing on learning. The learner may feel unsafe that they may be for example, be sexually abused in such a home. The learner will also have trouble completing work because the primary concern is safety.

Love and belonging needs

These needs according to Maslow (1954) include friendships and family. Orphaned learners are bound to lack that feeling of love and belonging as they have no parents and they are loosely tied to their extended families as they have to stand up for themselves. These children often end up in early marriages in search of love and belonging thereby dropping out of school.

Self esteem

Self esteem includes confidence, achievement, respect of others, and a need to be a unique individual (Martin and Joomis, 2007). If these needs are not met individuals will feel inferior, weak and helpless. Orphaned learners are often marginalised and looked down upon in society hence they suffer lack of respect and recognition. Thus, orphaned children are stigmatised and sometimes labelled due to the circumstances through which they lost their parents, for example through death caused by HIV and AIDS.

Self actualisation

This is the desire for one to become everything that one is capable of becoming. Maslow (1943: 10) was insistent about the value and importance of self actualisation "What a man can be. He must be." This need is not motivated by a deficiency but rather by a desire for personal growth. However, Maslow hypothesised that self-actualisation, although the ultimate goal of the human personality could not be satisfactorily achieved unless other drives and needs were mostly fulfilled first.

With regard to orphaned learners it is extremely hard to self-actualise as they are not able to fully commit to and pursue their goals in life because of various hindrances emanating from their experiences. Education is the major vehicle to self-actualisation, hence such learners' chances of completing or doing well in school are slim, resulting in them failing to self actualise.

METHODOLOGY

This section focuses on the research approach, research design, sampling, data collection methods, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Research approach

The current study adopted a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a naturalistic enquiry that seeks to discover the meanings that people have for different phenomena (Lincoln and Guba, 2010). Tewksbury (2009) asserted that qualitative research primarily focuses on micro level issues. In this qualitative research the focus was on depth not breadth of understanding a specific and small number of individuals and settings. This study was involved in finding out

what people think, and how they feel concerning challenges encountered by orphaned learners.

Research design
Within this approach the phenomenological design was utilized. Phenomenological design allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the social phenomena from the participants' perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010:315). According to Creswell (2010); Leedy and Ormrod (2001:57) the purpose of a qualitative phenomenological study is to understand an experience from the participant's point of view. The phenomenology is concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved. The researchers chose phenomenological methods because they are particularly effective in bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions in this case, of the orphaned learners, school heads and guidance and counselling teachers on challenges experienced by orphaned learners.

Sampling
A non-probability sampling procedure namely purposive sampling was used for the selection of knowledgeable and experienced participants. Magwa and Magwa (2015) asserted that the aim of purposive sampling is to select participants who are knowledgeable with regard to phenomenon under study. Three categories of participants were selected from 5 primary schools in Shurugwi District. These were 5 school heads, 5 guidance and counselling teachers, and 6 orphaned learners who had dropped out of primary education. These participants were selected because it was assumed that they had rich information pertaining to the problems that force orphaned learners out of primary education. A total of 16 participants made up the sample of this study.

Data collection methods
With insights from De vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delpart (2005) a mixture of data gathering methods namely; interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis was adapted to obtain meaningful, accurate, and comprehensive data. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from guidance and counselling teachers and school heads since they were few. Focus group discussion was used to engage orphaned learners who had dropped out primary education in a discussion on problems that forced them out of school. In this study, document analysis was also used as part of triangulation process to supplement information from focus group discussion and interviews.

Data analysis
Patton (2012) viewed data analysis as the ordering and structuring of data to produce knowledge. To give meaning to the raw data, analysis of the data has to be made (Creswell, 2010). Data were analysed using thematic content analysis in this study. The researchers analysed the collected data by assigning meaning to it through the establishment of emerging themes.

Ethical issues
According to Magwa and Magwa (2015); Oliver (2010) and Creswell (2010) ethical issues are always of primary concern when working with human research subjects. Prior to entering research sites, permission to carry out the study was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. Participants were informed during research process that they were allowed to withdraw from the study anytime. The researchers assured participants that the information collected would be kept confidential and used for the purpose of the study only.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented, analysed and discussed based on the emergent main themes:

- Financial constraints that weaken the ability of orphans to stay in schools
- The psycho-social pressures that cause orphans to drop out of primary education
- Strategies that can be employed to prevent school drop out by orphaned learners.

Theme 1: Financial constraints that force orphans out of primary education

The study revealed that many orphans in Shurugwi District do not have money for school uniforms, fees, food and other school prerequisites. The researchers noted that many orphans are unable to continue with their studies because extended families were not able to raise money for school uniforms, fees, food and other prerequisites. To support this, one of the orphans had this to say:

> *My mother used to purchase all the school prerequisites like uniforms. The problem just came when I started to live with my step mother. My step mother does not like to be bothered by asking her to purchase school uniforms for me, she says " I am not your mother, so please do not trouble me." I am no longer going to school because I do not have a uniform and other school prerequisites like books, pens and rulers.*

Almost similarly, another orphan expressed her sentiments as follows:

> *It is not that I do not like to come to school but the truth of the matter is that, the season in which we are is very cold, therefore it is difficult for me to come to school without putting on shoes.*

As this was not enough, one of the orphans expressed his sentiments as follows:

> *It is not that I like or enjoy living in the streets. The reason behind this is that, my step mother was not giving me enough food due to financial constraints. Before my mother died, I ate three times a day but when she died, I started to eat one meal per day and again I was not given food to take for breakfast and lunch at school. These were some of the problems that pushed me out of primary education into the streets.*

During interviews guidance and counselling teachers and school heads confirmed that financial constraints was a major challenge pushing orphans out of primary education. One of the guidance and counselling teachers had this to say:

> *The major challenge that orphans meet is schooling costs. Normally all the previous years, we used to get school fees for these orphans from Beam and stationery from UNICEF but the supplies are now difficult to get.*

In the same vein, documents analysed especially the school registers confirmed that many orphans withdrew from school due to financial constraints. Findings from the study corroborate Fauk, Mwakinyali, Putra and Mwanri (2017) who established that orphans in Mbeya Rural District in Tanzania were withdrawn from school due to financial constraints. Extended families in Mbeya Rural District were seeing it as an important strategy to reduce the school requirements and allow savings from these to cover other essentials. In line with this view, a study by Nchimbi (2013) confirmed that due to financial constraints orphans are subjected to difficult situation in meeting their basic needs and educational requirements such as school fees and stationery just to mention some. Similar findings were presented by Xiaoming et al (2009); Jakachira (2012); Shahidul and Zehadul (2015); Fleming (2015) and Oyedele et al (2016). In this sense, orphaned learners due to financial constraints are more likely to lose opportunities to attend school.

Theme 2: Psycho-social pressures which cause orphans to dropout of primary education
The study established that children living as orphans are mostly exposed to stunted development of their emotional intelligence and life skills in the areas of communication, decision-making and many others. It was also revealed that orphans lack basic elements of belonging, competence and self-worth removed due to the death of their parents. During interviews, one of the guidance and counselling teachers had this to say:

> *The trauma of the parents protracted illness followed by death left orphans with a profound sense of loss, abandonment and guilt. They therefore feel an even greater need for love and security. Without special emotional and psychological support, the orphans are likely to become depressive to suffer learning difficulties at school and to engage in anti-social or delinquent behaviour that force them out of primary education.*

In line with this, one of the orphans gave a vivid account of the harsh treatment she received from her step father in the following vein:

> *I really do not know why my step-father hates me. He always beats me. Yesterday I was beaten up after I had lost a small amount of money. Sometimes I fail to understand him. My father passed away and my father's young brother inherited my mother but the way he treats my mother is very bad. I am sick and tired of being beaten.*

In the same vein, another orphan expressed his sentiments as follows:

> *I have no one to tell my problems. My uncle and aunt have no time to listen to me. The whole of last week, I was not feeling well and when I told them my problem, they did not even listen.*

School heads during interviews confirmed that orphans needed emotional support and belonging as a way of reducing psychological stress. The study elucidated that orphaned learners' psycho-social needs tend to be neglected and as a result they drop out of school. This finding confirms the study by Mwoma and Jace (2015) which established that psycho-social pressures can lead to children dropping out of school prematurely. In a similar vein, Nchimbi (2013) posited that it is worth noting that loss of either one or both parents denies a child the right to parental care, including emotional and psychological support for his/her wellbeing. In support of the above view, Tadesse et al (2014) pointed out that when children lose one or both of their parents due to any cause, they experience multiple psychosocial problems like grief, hopelessness, anxiety, stigmatisation, physical and mental violent, labour abuse, lack of community support, lack of parental love, withdraw from society as a whole, feelings of guilt, depression, aggression, as well as eating, sleeping and learning disturbances. In this sense, these psychosocial problems are likely to force orphans out of school into streets as a coping strategy. This is also echoed by Ntozi, Ahimbisibwe, Odwee, Ayiga and Okurut (1999); Xiaoming et al (2009) and Jakachira (2012) who stressed that psycho-social support is necessary to mitigate school dropout by orphaned learners. Given the above facts, it is therefore important to note that psycho-social pressure can weaken the ability of the orphan to stay in school.

Theme 3: Strategies to prevent school dropout
The study established that there was need for a special curriculum relevant to the problems faced by orphans in their daily lives to enable them to attend/remain in schools. Such a curriculum should emphasis on life skills and practical skills for daily livings. In support of this view, one of the guidance and counselling teachers had this to say:

> *Teachers need to be equipped with life orientation skills that are relevant in addressing the plights of orphaned learners. This would help orphans to stay in schools. If they stay in schools they would get the skills and credentials they need to become productive members of society.*

In a similar vein, one of the school heads suggested the following strategies to prevent orphaned learners from school dropout:

> *There is need for collaboration between primary schools and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) so that orphans who had problems in attending school can be provided with necessary school prerequisites.*

> *Schools should create a more supportive environment for addressing problems of orphans so that they can complete primary education.*

During focus group discussions, orphaned learners confirmed that provision of school prerequisites by Non-Governmental Organisation and a supportive environment at the school could prevent absence or school dropout. Almost similarly, Wood and Goba (2011) in their study established that teachers' training in life orientation is critical in equipping them with knowledge and skills and improving their attitudes towards dealing with orphans. The finding from this research study which established the need for a special curriculum to curb school dropout by orphaned learners, was also echoed by Nkhoma (2013) who recommended the need for a special curriculum for orphans in order to address four areas of psycho-social support including emotional, social, spiritual and physical wellbeing. These are essential elements for meaningful and positive development of a child. Similar findings on strategies that can be put to prevent school dropout were presented by previous studies for example, Kurebwa and Mabhanda (2015); Mupa and Chinooneka (2014). From the above discussion, the provision of educational requirements such as school fees, uniforms and stationeries, development of special curriculum relevant to the needs of orphans and creation of supportive environment that addresses the needs of orphans can prevent orphaned learners from leaving the school without the skills and credentials they need to become successful members of society.

CONCLUSION

The researchers reached the conclusion that financial constraints and psycho-social pressures are the major challenges that push orphaned learners out of primary education prematurely. It was further established that school dropout can be prevented by provision of educational requirements to orphans, creation of special curriculum relevant to the needs of orphans and lastly creation of a supportive environment that addresses the needs of orphans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of the study on the challenges that force orphaned learners out of primary education, the following recommendations are made:

- Special curriculum for orphaned learners should be developed with emphasis on life skills and practical skills for daily livings.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should create a more supportive environment in primary schools to enable orphaned learners to remain in schools.

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